

The Girl Beyond the Trail

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"David balanced himself on the edge of his cot.
'You mean—you're going to murder me?' . . .

. . . 'If standing you up against a tree and putting a bullet through your heart is murder—yes,' gloated Brokaw."

IN that chaotic night in which he was drifting, David experienced neither pain nor very much of the sense of life. And yet, without seeing or feeling, he seemed to be living. All was dead in him but that last consciousness which is almost the spirit. He might have been dreaming; and minutes, hours, or even years might have passed in that dream. For a long time he seemed to be sinking through blackness; and then something stopped him, without jar or shock, and he was rising.

He could hear nothing at first. There was a vast silence about him, a silence as deep and unbroken as the abysmal pit in which he seemed to be floating. After that he felt himself swaying and rocking as if tossed gently on the billows of a sea. That was the first thought that took shape in his struggling brain: he was at sea; he was on a ship in the heart of a black night; and he was alone. He tried to call out, but his tongue seemed gone. It seemed a long time before day broke, and then it was a strange day. Little needles of light pricked his eyes; silver strings shot like flashes of web-like lightning through the darkness; and then he began to feel and hear. A dozen hands seemed holding him down, so that he could move neither arms nor feet. He heard voices. There appeared to be many of them at first—an unintelligible rumble; and then, very swiftly, they became two.

He opened his eyes. The first thing that he observed was a bar of sunlight against the eastern wall of his room. That bit of sunlight was like a magnet thrown there to reassemble the faculties that had drifted away from him in the dark night of his unconsciousness. It tried to tell him, first of all, that it was afternoon—quite late in the afternoon. He would have sensed that fact in another moment or two, but something came between him and the radiance flung by the westward slant of the sun. It was a face, two faces—Hauck's and Brokaw's! Yes, Brokaw was there, staring down at him—a fiend still—and almost unrecognizable. He was no longer stripped, and he was no longer bloody. His face was swollen; his lips were raw; one eye was closed.

DAVID tried to sit up. He managed to balance himself on the edge of his cot. His head was dizzy, and he felt clumsy and helpless. Then he discovered that his hands were tied behind him, and his feet were bound. He thought Hauck looked like an exultant gargoyle as he stood there with a horrible grin in his face, and Brokaw—

It was Brokaw who bent over him, his thick fingers knotting, his one open eye fairly livid.

"I'm glad you ain't dead, Raine."

His voice was husky, muffled by the swollen thickness of his battered lips.

"Thanks," said David. The dizziness was leaving him, but there was a steady pain in his head. He tried to smile. "Thanks!" It was rather idiotic of him to say that.

Brokaw's hands were moving slowly toward his throat when Hauck drew him back.

"I won't touch him—not now," he growled. "But to-night—oh, God!"

His knuckles snapped.

"You — liar! You — spy! You — sneak!" he cursed through his broken teeth. David saw where they had been—a cavity in that cruel, battered mouth. "And you think, after that—"

Again Hauck tried to draw him away. Brokaw flung off his hand angrily.

"I won't touch him—but I'll tell him, Hauck! The devil take me, body and soul, if I don't! I want him to know—"

"You're a fool!" cried Hauck. "Stop, or by heaven—"

Brokaw opened his mouth and laughed, and David saw the havoc of his blows.

"You'll do what, Hauck? Nothing—that's what you'll do! Ain't I told him you killed that *napao* from MacPherson? Haven't I told him enough to set us both swinging?" He bent over David until his breath struck the other's face.

"I'm glad you didn't die, Raine, because I want to see you when you shuffle off. We're only waiting for the Indians to go. Old Wapi starts with his tribe at sunset. I'm sorry, but we can't get the heathen away any earlier, because he says it's good luck to start a journey at sunset in the Moulting Moon. You'll start yours a little later—as soon as they're out of sound of a rifle shot. You can't trust Indians, eh? You made a hit with old Wapi, and it wouldn't do to let him know we're going to send you where you sent my bear. Eh—would it?"

"You mean—you're going to murder me?" said David.

"If standing you up against a tree and putting a bullet through your heart is murder—yes," gloated Brokaw.

"Murder—" repeated David.

HE seemed powerless to say more than that. An overwhelming dizziness was creeping over him. The pain was splitting his head, and he swayed backward. He fought to recover himself, to hold himself up; but that returning sickness reached from his brain to the pit of his stomach, and with a groan he sank face downward on the cot. Brokaw was still talking, but he could no longer understand his words. He heard Hauck's sharper voice, their retreating footsteps, the opening and closing of the door—fighting all the time to keep himself from falling off into that black and bottomless pit again. It was many minutes before he drew himself to a sitting posture on the edge of his cot, this time slowly and guardedly, so that he would not rouse the pain in his head. It was there. He could feel it burning steadily and deeply.

The bar of sunlight was gone from the wall, and through a window in the west end of his room he saw the fading light of day outside. It was morning when he had fought Brokaw—it was now almost night. The wash-basin was where it had fallen when Henry struck him. He saw a red stain on the floor where he must have dropped. Then again he looked at the window. It was rather oddly out of

place, so high up that one could not look in from the outside—a rectangular slit to let in light, and so narrow that a man could not have wormed his way through it. He had seen nothing particularly significant in its location last night or this morning; but now it struck him as forcibly as the pieces of babiche thong that bound his wrists and ankles. A guest might be housed in this room without suspicion, and at the turn of a key be made a prisoner. There was no way of escape unless one broke down the heavy door or cut through the log walls.

Gradually he was overcoming his sensation of sickness. His head was clearing, and he began to breathe more deeply. He tried to move his cramped arms. They were without feeling, like lifeless weights hung to his shoulders. With an effort he thrust out his feet. And then—through the window—there came to him the muffled boom, boom, boom of a tom-tom.

WAPI and his Indians were going. David heard a weird and growing chant, a savage psalm to the wild gods of the Moulting Moon. A gasp rose in David's throat. It was almost a cry. His last hope was going—with Wapi and his tribe! Would they help him if they knew? If he shouted? If he shrieked for them through that open window? It was a mad thought, an impossible thought; but it set his heart throbbing for a moment. And then—suddenly—it seemed to stand still. A key rattled in the lock, turned, the door opened—and Marge O'Doone stood before him.

She was panting—sobbing, as if she had been running a long distance. She made no effort to speak, but dropped at his feet and began sawing at the caribou babiche with a knife. She had come prepared with that, a ten-inch hunting-knife! He felt the bonds snap, and before either had spoken she was at his back, and his hands were free. They were like lead.

She dropped the knife then, and her hands were at his face—dark with the dry stain of blood; and over and over again she was calling him by the name she had given him—Sakewawin. And then the tribal chant of Wapi and his people grew nearer and louder as they passed into the forest, and with a choking cry the girl drew back from David and stood facing him.

"I—must hurry," she spoke swiftly. "Listen! They are going! Hauck or Brokaw will go as far as the lake with Wapi—and the one who does not go will return here. See, Sakewawin—I have brought you a knife! When he comes—you must kill him!"

The chanting voices had passed. The psalm was dying away in the direction of the forest.

He did not interrupt her. With hands clutched at her breast, she went on:

"I waited—until all were out there. They kept me in my room, and left Marge—the old Indian woman—to watch me. When they were all out to see Wapi off, I struck her over the head with the end of Nisikoo's rifle. Maybe she is dead. Tara is out there; I know where to find

